SPORT

Osimhen strikes twice as Nigeria set up World Cup qualifier with DR Congo

RABAT: Star Victor Osimhen scored twice in extra time to clinch a 4-1 victory for Nigeria over Gabon on Thursday and set up an African 2026 World Cup qualifying final against the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Captain Chancel Mbemba was the Congolese hero in the later semi-final, scoring in the first minute of added time to beat eight-time World Cup qualifiers Cameroon 1-0 in torrential rain in Rabat.

Nigeria will face DR Congo on Sunday in the Moroccan capital and the winners qualify for a six-nation inter-continental tournament in March. The African play-offs involved the best four group runners-up.

Bolivia and New Caledonia have already secured slots in the play-offs, Iraq or UAE will represent Asia, and there will be two qualifiers from the Central America/Caribbean region. Europe are excluded.

After semi-finals among the four lowest ranked teams, the winners of two finals will secure places at the World Cup in the United States, Canada and Mexico.

Nigeria are seeking a seventh appearance at the global showpiece and DR Congo a second, having played in the 1974 tournament when the central African country was called Zaire.

Osimhen squandered a great chance to give Nigeria victory at the end of added time, firing wide with only goalkeeper Loyce Mbaba to beat.

But the 2023 African Player of the Year atoned on 102 minutes, firing across Mbaba into the far corner after being set up by Benjamin Fredrick.

He struck again on 110 minutes, controlling a long pass before once again beating the goalkeeper with a shot into the far corner.

After conceding a 89th-minute equaliser in regular time, Nigeria regained the lead when substitute Chidera Ejuke scored his first goal for the Super Eagles after 97 minutes. Akor Adams had put Nigeria ahead on 78 minutes and Mario Lemina levelled after 89 minutes.

Nigeria had a purple patch midway through the opening half with Osimhen coming close three times to breaking the deadlock.

The 26-year-old Galatasaray striker headed wide twice, then had an appeal for handball turned down after a VAR review.

There was another VAR check on the hour after Nigeria full-back Bright Osayi-Samuel pulled the shirt of Aaron Appindangoye in the box, denying the defender a chance to connect with a free-kick.

After a lengthy review, Gabonese appeals for a penalty were turned down by the South African referee.

The deadlock in a tense showdown was finally broken when Adams intercepted a misplaced Gabon pass, rounded Mbaba and scored.

There was an element of luck about the Gabon equaliser as goalkeeper Stanley Nwabali appeared to have the shot from Lemina covered until it took a deflection and sneaked into the corner of the net.

With just six world ranking places separating Cameroon and DR Congo a close encounter was expected, and so it proved with few clearcut scoring chances in a cagey clash before Mbemba struck.

Manchester United striker Bryan Mbeumo had the best opportunity for Cameroon midway through the second half, but his low shot was just off target.

A little earlier, Congolese veteran Cedric Bakambu was foiled by goalkeeper Andre Onana, who pushed away his shot at the expense of a corner.

Group winners Algeria, Cape Verde, Egypt, Ghana, Ivory Coast, Morocco, Senegal, South Africa and Tunisia secured the nine automatic qualifying places reserved for Africa.—AFP

Curacao thrash Bermuda to top World Cup qualifying group

MIAMI: Curacao closed in on a 2026 World Cup berth on Thursday, routing Bermuda 7-0 to go top of their group in CONCACAF qualifying as Jamaica were held to a 1-1 draw by Trinidad and Tobago.

Jamaica, seeking a second World Cup appearance after making their debut in 1998, came into the night atop Group 'B' in the final round of qualifying in the North and Central America and Caribbean region.

A victory by Jamaica and a loss by Curacao would have seen the former clinch a berth, but instead they'll face a must-win match against Curacao when qualifying concludes on Tuesday.

Dick Advocaat-led Curacao romped past winless Bermuda in Devonshire.

Jordi Paulina scored two goals in a memorable Curacao debut, while Leandro Bacuna, Juninho Bacuna, Sonja Hansen, Ar'Jany Martha and Roshon van Eijma scored a goal each to complete the rout.

In Port of Spain, Jamaica broke a scoreless deadlock in the 53rd minute as Renaldo Cephas finished off a fast break down the left side with a shot past Trinidad and Tobago keeper Denzil Smith into the bottom right corner.

Kevin Molino grabbed the equaliser for Trinidad and Tobago in the 85th, but the draw still saw them eliminated.

Meanwhile, Suriname kept their bid for a first World Cup berth on track with a 4-0 victory over El Salvador in Paramaribo that eliminated the Salvadorans.

Richonell Margaret scored twice and Tjaronn Chery and Doraso Klas added one goal apiece for Suriname, who are tied atop Group 'A' on nine points with Panama, who beat Guatemala 3-2.

Honduras, chasing a fourth World Cup appearance and their first since 2014, were stunned 2-0 by Nicaragua in Managua to stand tied at the top of Group 'C' with Haiti, who beat Costa Rica 1-0.

Nicaragua, who came in bottom of the group, opened the scoring in the 11th on a goal from Bancy Hernandez. Honduras pressed in vain for an equaliser but Jaime Moreno's 82nd minute strike sealed the win.

After missing a chance to secure their berth, Honduras face a tough final match against third-placed Costa Rica while Haiti play Nicaragua.—AFP

PARIS: Kylian Mbappe (L) shoots to score against Ukraine during their 2026 World Cup qualifier at the Parc des Princes Stadium.—AFP

France qualify for World Cup as Portugal, Norway forced to wait

PARIS: France reached the 2026 World Cup with a 4-0 win over Ukraine on Thursday as the country marked the 10th anniversary of the 2015 Paris attacks, while Portugal were made to wait after losing 2-0 in Dublin as Cristiano Ronaldo saw red.

Norway must also be patient after Italy struck late in Moldova to prevent them from stamping their ticket to next year's tournament in North America.

France's victory came in an emotionally-charged Parc des Princes, which observed a minute's silence to mark the 10th anniversary of the attacks in and around Paris on Friday, November 13, 2015.

Most of the 130 people killed in the attacks lost their lives at the Bataclan concert hall in the capital, where they were attending a concert.

But one person died near the Stade de France in the northern Paris suburb of Saint-Denis, where multiple explosions took place as suicide bombers attempted to enter the ground during a friendly between Les Bleus and Germany.

Didier Deschamps was the coach then and remains in charge now, with the approaching World Cup to be his final tournament before stepping down.

"Given the context tonight, we are pleased to have put some smiles on faces by securing qualification," said Deschamps. "We have fulfilled our objective. I understand that it is seen as normal that France qualify but we still had to go out and do it, so we are very proud."

Second-half goals by Kylian Mbappe and Michael Olise, as well as a first international strike for Hugo Ekitike, gave Deschamps' side an unassailable six-point lead over both Iceland, who beat Azerbaijan 2-0, and Ukraine at the top of Group 'D'.

While France can now look forward to the draw for the finals, which takes place in Washington, DC, on December 5, Ukraine and Iceland meet each other on Sunday in a shoot-out to decide who continues on into the play-offs next March.

Portugal would have secured top spot in Group 'F' with a win against the Republic of Ireland.

But a Ronaldo red card for violent conduct when trailing 2-0 to a Troy Parrott brace meant Portugal remain on 10 points, three ahead of the Irish and two ahead of Hungary, who won 1-0 against Armenia.

Portugal's final group match will be against Armenia in Porto on Sunday, while Hungary welcome Ireland in what will likely be a clash for second place.

Parrott headed the hosts into the lead on 17 minutes, before doubling up on the stroke of half-time.

Ireland then dug in deep to frustrate their fancied opponents, whose task effectively became insurmountable when 40-year-old Ronaldo swung an elbow into Dara O'Shea's back and was dismissed after a VAR review.

Ronaldo, the men's all-time top goalscorer in international football, could potentially miss the start of the World Cup if Portugal qualify, depending on the length of his ban.

"We didn't manage [to win], we're sad and disappointed with what we did here today," Portugal midfielder Bernardo Silva said.

Despite romping to an Erling Haaland-inspired 4-1 win over Estonia, Norway will also have to wait until the final matchday to wrap up their berth at the World Cup.

Forwards Alexander Sorloth and Haaland both netted doubles in the space of 12 second-half minutes earlier in Oslo, but the Norwegians had to wait on Italy's later match against Moldova before they could be certain of topping Group I.

The Moldovans looked to have done enough to send Stale Solbakken's side to the finals, until Gianluca Mancini struck on 88 minutes to send Italy on the way to a victory that kept their automatic qualification hopes alive.

Inter Milan forward Pio Esposito doubled Italy's lead in injury time to ensure Sunday's meeting between the Italians and Norway at the San Siro will be a blockbuster.

Three points separate the pair but Norway hold an imposing head-to-head record over Italy after cruising to a 3-0 win in their encounter in June.

"It wasn't easy... We also knew that Norway had won, so it was a bit of a strange atmosphere," Sandro Tonali told Sky Sport Italia. "It would mean a lot to us [to beat Norway], because it might not heal the wound, but it will help us push forward."

In Group 'K', already-qualified England beat Serbia 2-0 at Wembley courtesy of goals by Arsenal duo Bukayo Saka and Eberechi Eze, while Albania edged Andorra 1-0 to sew up second spot.—AFP

Acosta tops practice in Valencia

VALENCIA: Pedro Acosta was fastest in practice for the Valencia Grand Prix on Friday, as Aprilia's Jorge Martin enjoyed a full day back after injury.

Cleared to return this week after a collarbone fracture at the Japanese GP in September, 2024 world champion Martin came in 22nd, 1.164 seconds behind Acosta. Martin has endured an injury-hit season, preventing him from defending his title, which was won by Marc Marquez.

Alex Marquez wrapped up second and Marco Bezzecchi is poised to seal third place in Valencia, leading Francesco Bagnaia, fourth, by 35 points going into the final race.

Bezzecchi finished second while Franco Morbidelli was third. Bagnaia was down in 14th and must take part in the first qualifying session on Saturday.

Pramac Yamaha's Jack Miller was fastest in the morning session but had to settle for sixth, behind Trackhouse Aprilia Ai Ogura in fifth and Alex Marquez in fourth.—AFP

RED Bull KTM Factory Racing team's Pedro Acosta of Spain in action during the practice session of the MotoGP Valencia Grand Prix on Friday.—AFP

UAE, Iraq draw to leave World Cup playoff outcome in balance

ABU DHABI: Iraq and the United Arab Emirates shared a 1-1 draw in Abu Dhabi on Thursday to leave their World Cup qualifying playoff finely poised ahead of the second leg in Basra on Tuesday.

Ali Al-Hamadi gave Iraqis the lead in the 10th minute but a header by Luanzinho eight minutes later secured a draw for Cosmin Olaroiu's hosts.

The winners of the two-legged clash will advance to an intercontinental playoff in March that will determine the final qualifier.

Both nations are attempting to qualify for the World Cup for the first time in a generation, with Iraq having previously appeared in Mexico in 1986 while the UAE made their only appearance at the finals four years later in Italy.

The Graham Arnold-coached Iraqis went in front after the home defence struggled to clear Amir Al-Ammari's free kick, Akam Hashim driving the ball across the face of goal from the left and Al-Hamadi swept his right-foot strike home.

Shortly after the Emiratis levelled through Luanzinho's header, the midfielder rising highest to meet Abdalla Ramadan's cross from the right.

Emirates goalkeeper Khalid Eisa made saves from Al-Hamadi and Mohanad Ali to ensure the sides went into the break level while Jalal Hassan had to be at his sharpest to keep out Ramadan's strike from distance.

Caio Lucas thought he had won the game for the UAE in the stoppage time when he bundled the ball over the line, but the effort was ruled out for a marginal offside call.—Reuters

NEWSBRIEF

Maaz helps Shaheens beat Oman

DOHA: Pakistan Shaheens on the back of an all-round performance by Maaz Sadaqat made a dominant start to their Asia Cup Rising Stars campaign with a 40-run victory over Oman at the West End Park International Cricket Stadium in Doha on Friday.

Opener Maaz anchored the innings with a scintillating 54-ball 96 not out laced with five fours and nine sixes. He was declared player-of-the-match.

Yasir Khan (26 off 26) supported Maaz before captain Mohammad Irfan Khan accelerated the scoring with a 44 off 21 balls hitting five sixes. In the death overs, Saad Masood's unbeaten 19 off six helped Shaheens post a solid 220-4 in the allotted 20 overs.

For Oman, four bowlers claimed a wicket apiece, with Muzahir Raza returning the most economical figures of one for 27.

Oman's innings never got going despite a fighting half-century from Zikria Islam, who came in at number seven and struck 57 off 28. Muzahir also scored an unbeaten 24-ball 46 laced with four fours and as many sixes.

For Shaheens, fast bowler Ubaid Shah impressed claimed three wickets for 29 while Maaz took two for 14. Leg-spinner Saad claimed two for 27 as Oman finished at 180-9.

Shaheens in their next group 'B' match face arch-rivals India 'A' on Sunday followed by the game against the UAE on Tuesday at the same venue.

Also on Friday, Indian 14-year-old player Vaibhav Suryavanshi smashed a breathtaking 144 off 42 balls as his second T20 century powered India 'A' to a mammoth total of 297-4 in their Asia Cup Rising Stars match against the UAE.

The player smashed 11 boundaries and clearing the rope an astonishing 15 times as he plundered 134 of his runs through fours and sixes alone. India easily won the game by 148 runs.—Agencies

Probables named for U-19 women's camp

LAHORE: The Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB) on Friday named 20 probables for Pakistan Women's U-19 tour to Bangladesh, which will feature five T20 games at the Cox's Bazar Academy Ground from December 2-12.

The probables will take part in a 14-day intensive training camp at the Hanif Mohammad High-Performance Centre in Karachi starting from Saturday, the board said in a press release.

Former Pakistan men's U-19 and Shaheens coach Mohammad Masroor will be the head coach for the camp and tour, while he will be accompanied by former Pakistan international Jaweria Rauf (fielding coach) and former first-class players Shoaib Khan (batting coach) and Naeem Tayyab (bowling coach) in the support staff.

he PCB's women's national selection committee will further finalise the 15-member travelling squad in due course. The squad will depart for Bangladesh on Nov 29 from Karachi.

Probables: Areesha Ansari, Fizza Fiaz, Malaika Suhani, Raahima Syed, Ravail Farhan, Zoofishan Ayyaz, Ayesha Riaz, Barirah Saif, Mahnoor Zeb, Shahar Bano, Aleesa Mukhtiar, Maria, Memoona Khalid, Rozina Akram, Zainab Khanum, Alzoha Hammad, Aqsa Habib, Eman Naseer, Komal Khan, Nasreen Ashraf.—Agencies

Conquerors, Challengers win

LAHORE: Conquerors thrashed Stars, while Challengers triumphed over Invincibles in their respective National Women's One-Day Tournament matches in Faisalabad on Friday.

Amber Kainat took 3-10 and Zunash Abdul Sattar registered 2-13 to bundle out Stars for 98 in their pursuit of 210 runs. Earlier, Maham Anees scored 53 off 106, stitching a 76-run fourth-wicket partnership with captain Fatima Sana (49 off 45). Pakistan wicket-keeper Sidra Nawaz, meanwhile, added 40.

Challengers' win over Invincibles was also a lopsided affair with the former chasing down a 228-run target with 82 balls and seven wickets to spare at the HPC Ground, thanks to Ayesha Zafar's unbeaten 93 off 103 balls, that featured 13 fours.

Ayesha scored 122 alongside Sadaf Shamas (54) while opening before stitching an unbeaten 67-run stand with Eyman Fatima (30 not out).

.Earlier, Pakistan opener Muneeba Ali's half-century (61 off 62) and a handy contribution from Dua Majid (44 off 65) led Invincibles past 200-run mark before getting bowled out for 227.—Agencies

Finalists decided

LAHORE: Rijas/Sheikhoo and FG/Din Polo reached final of 13th Maj Gen Saeed uz Zaman Janjua Memorial Polo Cup after registering contrasting wins here at the Garrison Polo Ground on Friday.

In the first semi-final, Mohib Faisal Shehzad's treble helped Rijas/Sheikhoo Steel edge Diamond Paints/Din 6-5. Another seasoned campaigner Raja Samiullah added two while Malik Ali Quli Khan contributed with one.

FG/Din Polo, meanwhile, downed SQ Seagold/Newage Cables 10-6 to confirm the other decider spot. Veteran Hamza Mawaz Khan starred for the winners with seven goals while team-mates Abbas Mukhtar and Sheikh Mohammad Raffay added two and one goal, respectively.—Sports Reporter

'Parker failed drugs test on day of defeat'

LONDON: Former world heavyweight champion Joseph Parker failed a drugs test on October 25, the day of his shock loss to Fabio Wardley in London, his promoter announced on Friday.

Parker suffered an 11th-round stoppage defeat by British boxer Wardley, in a fight concluding shortly before midnight local time, and lost his status as WBO mandatory challenger for undisputed heavyweight champion Oleksandr Usyk.

An initial report in UK tabloid the Sun said Parker had tested positive for cocaine, but this has not been confirmed. Parker had put himself on course for a potential fight against Usyk following six successive wins, a sequence including victories over Deontay Wilder, Zhilei Zhang and Martin Bakole.—AFP

Pakistan seal World Cup qualifier spot

LAHORE: Pakistan secured their place in the World Cup qualifiers after crushing Bangladesh 8-0 in Dhaka on Friday, taking an unassailable 2-0 lead in their three-match hockey series.

Mohammad Sufyan Khan and Rana Waheed Ashraf each scored two goals for Pakistan. Rana Waleed, Hannan Shahid, Afraz and Imad Butt added one goal apiece.

Pakistan had won the first match of the series 8-2. The final match of the series is scheduled for Sunday.—Sports Reporter

Kashif stars as Karachi Blues go second; Islamabad, Faisalabad play draw

LAHORE: Veteran spinner Kashif Bhatti took six wickets as Karachi Blues registered a crucial 193-run victory over Abbottabad in the Quaid-e-Azam Trophy seventh-round match at the Shoaib Akhtar Cricket Stadium in Rawalpindi on Friday.

Elsewhere, Faisalabad and Islamabad played out a thrilling draw at the Abbottabad Cricket Stadium. Three games of the round were decided a day earlier.

Karachi Blues' victory saw them rise to second in the premier first-class tournament's standings with slow left-armer Kashif posting 6-98 to help bundle out Abbottabad for 325 in their pursuit of 519. Abbottabad's only resistance came from Ahmed Khan (88 off 174) and tailender Shahab Khan (56 off 59).

In Abbottabad, it was agony for both Faisalabad and Islamabad. To win, the former needed two wickets while the latter 20 runs before bad light played spoilsport in the dying moments of the game to see it end in a stalemate.

Islamabad were 429-8 in 114 overs in the end having faced 75.2 overs on the last day after having resumed from overnight score of 159-1. Following day three centurion Shamyl Hussain's (131 off 158) early departure, Islamabad slipped to 199-4 before skipper Rohail Nazir chipped in with 65 off 110 balls hitting 10 fours.

Faisalabad then made inroads with the wickets of Rohail, Sarmad Bhatti and Jawad Ali reducing Islamabad to 299-7 and were in sight of a victory, when number seven batter Arsal Sheikh and number nine Hunain Shah joined forces to stall their advance with a century partnership.

Arsal remained unbeaten for 62 off 110 balls hitting nine fours, while Hunain brought up his third first-class half-century with seven fours and one six scoring 66 off 67 balls to put his team in line for a memorable chase. The duo put on 111 runs for the eighth wicket, which was broken by Ahmed Safi Abdullah with scorecard reading 410-8.

For Faisalabad, Afaq Afridi picked up three wickets, while Khurram Shahzad dismissed two batters.

Evading triumph and defeat both closely in the seventh round, Faisalabad ended up joint-third on points table with Peshawar with 109 points each, below toppers Sialkot (126) and second-placed Karachi Blues (110).

The eighth round of the tournament will begin on Monday across the same five venues in four cities.—Agencies